

General Gordon's statue at Gordon's School

"This statue was erected at Khartoum in 1904. Removed and presented to the School in 1959"

Curiosity aroused

A cloudless and warm sunny summer's afternoon teasingly invited me outside for a walk in the nearby heathland. In my walk, stretching further than normal, I found myself gazing up at a statue of General Gordon seated on a camel.

Standing imposingly in the corner of the games field at Gordon's School, the statue is perfectly placed to catch the light of the late evening sun.

I read the inscription on the statue's plinth. *[See left]*. My, it wasn't meant to be here.

I enquired at school reception to learn a little of the statue's history, and was politely directed to the school library.

There the Librarian pointed to the wall behind her, on which were photographs of the statue at its previous home in Khartoum, and many short notes on its journey from London to

Khartoum, including dunkings in the Thames estuary and the River Nile, and the reason it now resides peacefully in the grounds of Gordon's School.

How intriguing. But where to begin to learn more of its history, should I begin with General Gordon himself, the reason for the statue, about the sculptor, or the statue's journeys and river dunkings? Well, that's the order I've followed.



General Gordon
In the 1870's

General Gordon: a revered military hero

Charles Gordon was born on January 1833, in Woolwich, the son of Major-General Henry Gordon, an officer in the Royal Artillery. Following his father into the army, he chose the Royal Engineers where his aptitude for map making and planning military fortifications was suited. As a young Lieutenant, Gordon took part in the siege of Sebastopol in the Crimean War, afterwards working with various boundary commissions to draw the boundaries between Russia and Turkey.

It was in his adventures in China that he first came to public prominence. In July 1860 Gordon joined the British force in China where, now a Captain, he spent two years as Chief Royal Engineer. With special government permission he joined the Chinese Emperor's service, and successfully led Chinese troops to extraordinary exploits during the Taiping Rebellion of the 1860's, transforming a peasant guerrilla army into a disciplined fighting force.

Gordon and his army earned a soubriquet each, 'Chinese' Gordon, and the 'Ever-victorious army'. Gordon was rewarded with honours and promotion to Lt Colonel.

At home the public mostly viewed the British Army as a rough and drunken lot. Gordon's clear headedness and evangelical Christian belief's made him into a folk hero. Like many of our empire builders, it was by force of personality and determination that he accomplished so much.



"He is best remembered for his generosity and his struggle to give the benefits of education to the poor of this town."

Words on the plaque

Good works in Gravesend

After China, Gordon returned to spend six years at Gravesend to improve the defensive fortifications along the River Thames, including the modernisation of the New Tavern Fort

During this time another side of Gordon's complex personality was in evidence. His strong Christian belief showed in his sympathy for the suffering of the poor. In this Gordon applied much effort to alleviating child poverty.

He also fought to end the slave-like working conditions of boys on the Thames.

Gordon started quietly helping the poor and needy. He changed two rooms of his home at Fort House into classrooms with the second room doubling at times as an almshouse. His charity work continued, and he rented a small house in East Terrace for older children to gain a chance of higher education.

These good works are remembered to this day in Gravesend. In 2005, on the 120th anniversary of his death in Khartoum, the Mayor of the local council, at their annual service of remembrance for the General, unveiled a plaque on his statue in Gravesend's Gordon Memorial Garden.

Egypt and the Sudan

While working in Europe to improve access to the River Danube, Gordon made influential contacts which led, in 1874, to his appointment as Governor of the Equatorial Provinces of Egypt, where he was tasked to establish a line of posts throughout the region, promote peace among local tribes, and to halt slave traffic.

In six years Gordon's determination and resolve brought peace to the tribes of the Nile valley, mapped much of the upper Nile, fought the slave traders, opened-up river communications, and created secure defensive military posts. In doing all this he earned the highest

regard of the ruler of Egypt. Returning to Britain just once in those six years, he ended his tour of duty as governor-general of the entire Sudan. In 1880, ill and exhausted after years of work, he returned to Britain considering his work done.

For the next few years Gordon, by now promoted to Major General, had little respite. Recognised as an accomplished problem-solver he travelled to China, India, and Africa on various missions.

In 1884, Gordon returned to the Sudan to quell a popular Islamic uprising. He was appointed Governor-General by the British Government and given a

brief to sort things out and oversee the evacuation of Khartoum.

With typical energy, Gordon set about evacuating women, children and the sick and organised Khartoum's defences. The government rejected most of his requests for military support.

Khartoum was put under siege for 317 days, during which time Gordon earned hero status at home.

On 26 January 1885 the garrison, too exhausted to make proper resistance, fell to a sudden assault and General Gordon, with most of his force, was killed.

The British relief force arrived two days later.

A nation mourns and wants memorials

At the news of Gordon's death, there was uproar. Prime Minister Gladstone ignored the repeated urgings of the press, public, and Queen Victoria to get relief forces to go to the aid of General Gordon. On learning of his death, they naturally all blamed Prime Minister Gladstone for dithering and not sending support in time to save their now martyred warrior-saint.

Queen Victoria, for whom Gordon was reputed to be her favourite General, writing to Gladstone during the siege at Khartoum, said, "The Queen trembles for

Gen. Gordon's safety. If anything befalls *him*, the result will be awful".

Gladstone's popularity and premiership was badly damaged by the affair, the public viewing Gladstone as having neglected military affairs which, along with other failings, caused his government to fall later that year.

There was a national day of mourning on the 13th March 1885. National Memorials and enduring monuments were all the rage and met a worthy cause in the desire to commemorate the heroic deeds and death of

General Gordon.

At the express wish of Queen Victoria, and supported by public subscription, Gordon Boys' Home was established as the National Memorial to General Gordon, with building beginning shortly after his death.

It wasn't until 11 yrs later that General Kitchener, a friend of Gordon and a fellow Royal Engineer, avenged Gordon's death by leading an army to recapture the Sudan, culminating at the Battle of Omdurman in 1898.

"A brave soldier who fell at his post; happy is he to have fallen; his sufferings are over!"

Maj-Gen Rudolf von Slatin on hearing the news while a captive of the Mahdists

Memorials to the General

Questions were asked in Parliament in the summer of 1885 about a permanent memorial to General Gordon. The House voted an initial £500 to the Commissioner of Works towards a sum of £4000 for a bronze statue of the General, to be placed in Trafalgar Square.

The committee overseeing the memorial had initially considered a hospital in Port Said, Egypt. This was abandoned in favour of a statue. Hamo Thorneycroft, an artist chosen of the new

school of realistic sculpture, was chosen over that of artists of the earlier classical tradition.

Describing the statue, Thorneycroft wanted an imposing figure of Gordon to suit the Square's surroundings, he said, "The whole aspect of the statue I wanted to be resolute, solitary, but not sad".

Unveiled early in 1888, this statue, which is 10ft 6in high, now sits on the Embankment opposite the Ministry of Defence.

Meanwhile, the Corps of Royal Engineers commissioned their own memorial from the sculptor Edward Onslow Ford, to be erected at their home at Brompton Barracks.

It's understandable that Onslow Ford would want to depict Gordon riding a camel, as it was well known that General Gordon was a great camel rider. In one of his letters he states it was only by hard camel riding that he held his position and respect among the people in Sudan.



General Gordon by Hamo Thorneycroft



Edward Onslow Ford

Sculpting a camel

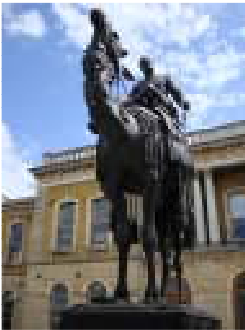
The Pall Mall Gazette interviewed Edward Onslow Ford in his studio in March 1890, where he said of General Gordon's statue that, "I've been at work upon it more or less for two years".

He said depicting the camel had taken most time. "I did it at the Zoo, in wax and

worked for two summers."

Difficulties he successfully overcame were it being made on a small scale for portability, and then enlarged in the studio, also the restlessness peculiar to camels when not lying down, and the rapidity with which it changes its coat during the seasons.

Onslow Ford said, "It was fortunate that one of the camels in the Zoo was exactly the sort I wanted – a highly bred Sudan camel, such as used by officers of the Camel Corps. A camel of this sort stands some 6 ft. 3in. high."



Statue of General Gordon at Brompton Barracks, Chatham

The unveiling

On 19th May 1890 the Prince of Wales unveiled the statue of General Gordon in the square of Brompton Barracks, Chatham opposite the Royal Engineers' Institute, and facing the Crimean Arch.

The Royal Engineers'

Inspector General said that the origin of the idea of putting up this memorial by subscription among the engineering corps was as a mark of respect to a late distinguished comrade.

The statue represents General Gordon in his official dress as Governor-

General of Sudan with his medals on his breast, and rattan in hand, with the camel wearing the appropriate head gear - single guiding chain and the traditional leather Sudan water bottle.

The Morning Post and public subscription

"[thank] the readers of the Morning Post for carrying out the idea I started some time ago..."

Kitchener's words at the unveiling of the second cast of the statue

Amidst the talk of raising memorials, even in the year of Gordon's death, were impassioned pleas for some form of monument in Egypt and Sudan, particularly in Khartoum, the site of his death.

General Kitchener was among those urging for a Gordon Memorial at Khartoum. Kitchener, it should be remembered was a young officer who was part of the force sent that

failed to relieve the siege of Khartoum, and who later, as head of the Egyptian Army, recaptured Sudan in 1898 from the forces that had killed General Gordon

Kitchener used his close friendship with Lord Glenesk, proprietor of the Morning Post newspaper, to have the paper appeal for funds to erect a statue of Gordon in Khartoum.

Personally undertaking all

the arrangements, Lord Glenesk negotiated with the sculptor, securing a replica of Onslow Ford's statue of Gordon seated on a camel.

He arranged for the site in St Martin's Place, London, where the statue could be seen prior to its shipment to Khartoum, and he spoke movingly at the unveiling, saying, "we detain it here for a short time before it finds its natural home ...".

The journey to Khartoum

Lord Glenesk assumed responsibility to ship the statue to Khartoum.

On October 15th 1902, his newspaper, the Morning Post, reported, "A representative of the Morning Post visited Millwall docks yesterday found the Gordon statue on a barge alongside the *Cedardene*, which was sunk in the Thames on Thursday morning as the result of a collision with a Russian vessel."

"The *Cedardene*, after having been refloated, has returned to her berth and her cargo is being

discharged. The statue was under water for three tides, and became thickly coated with Thames mud."

"The stout skeleton case .. remains intact, however, and after a plentiful washing the statue is none the worse for the immersion."

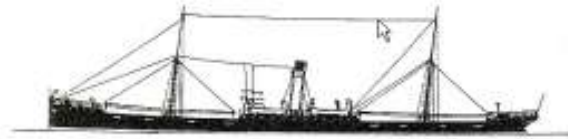
The report continues, "The managing owners [Ellerman Lines] of the *Cedardene* are making arrangements for transshipment to their other vessel the *Lesbian*, which sails for Malta and Alexandria on Saturday."

There are reports that the statue also sank in the

River Nile on its way to Khartoum. An eventful journey you could say. The *Cedardene* was wrecked in February 1903 off the coast of Morocco.



SS *Cedardene*'s funnel colours of Ellerman Lines



SS *Cedardene*

Built in 1881 in Sunderland
Launched as the *Clan Monroe*, Clan Line
Changed name in 1899 to *Cedardene*
2,108 gross tons
285 ft long, 37 ft wide, 24 ft depth
Two boilers, 300 nautical horse power

Gordon statue no longer wanted in Sudan

Britain re-established Anglo-Egyptian rule after victory over the Mahidi in 1898. The Sudan was now run by a governor-general appointed by Egypt with British consent.

The rise of nationalism and the desire to shake off colonial rule in both Egypt and Sudan was such that by the early 1950's Britain was ceded independence to both countries.

In 1954 the governments of Egypt and Britain signed a treaty guaranteeing Sudan independence on 1 January 1956.

An independent Sudan soon removed both the statues of Gordon and Kitchener and placed them in temporary storage.

In answer to a question about the statues in the House of Commons in December 1958, the Minister replied. "Her Majesty's Government have accepted the offer of the Sudan Government to present the statues of General Gordon and Lord Kitchener to them and the statues will be brought to the United Kingdom in due

course. Where they will eventually be placed is being considered."



General Gordon's statue at Khartoum, pictured in 1936



Statue of General Gordon at Gordon's School

A suitable site found for the statue

In January 1959, the Minister of Works for the government was asked a question about "providing possible sites for the statues of Gordon and Kitchener which are being brought from Khartoum."

The Minister of Works replied, "Various suggestions have been made in the Press and

elsewhere about the disposal of these statues."

His answer continued, "After careful consideration the Government have decided to offer the statue of General Gordon to the Gordon Boys' School at Woking, and that of Lord Kitchener to the School of Military Engineering at

Chatham."

"Both bodies have made definite applications and have offered to meet the cost of erection and of transport within this country."

General Gordon's statue finds a home

Gordon's School record of its return says, "The statue arrived at Chatham docks, along with that of Kitchener's statue. The statue arrived at the school on 2nd April 1959."

"The firm who originally cast the statue in 1902 was engaged to unpack the statue and repair it."

"They found a lot of minor damage, but fortunately most of the broken parts

had fallen off in transit, and were still inside the case."

"The plinth, designed and made by the Brookwood Necropolis Company was ready by 4th May. The plinth was presented to the school by Lady Huddleston, wife of the Governor-General of Sudan in 1940 to 1947."

The unveiling ceremony, on 14th May, 1960, was attended by a large and

distinguished company of over 1,500 people, including a representative from the Sudanese Embassy.

In Khartoum for 55 years, the statue now resides peacefully at the corner of the games field at Gordon's School, West End.

"forever gazing down on the boys he loved so well."

The words of Brigadier Nottingham, Gordon School Commandant, spoken at the unveiling ceremony

The inscriptions on the plinth

On the front of the plinth is the inscription, "Charles George Gordon".

On the left side of the plinth, the words, "Born Woolwich 28th January 1833, killed Khartoum 26th January, 1855"; on the right

side the words, "This Statue Was Erected at Khartoum In 1904. Removed and presented to the School In 1959."

And on the base of the right side of the plinth the words, "This plinth has been

presented in memory of Major-General Sir Hubert J. Huddleston, G.G.M.C., G.G.B., C.B., D.S.O., M.C., who served the Sudan for 28 years and was Governor-General 1940-47."

Sources: Gordon's School, The Royal Engineers Museum, Lord Glenesk and the Morning Post by Reginald Lucas, Lloyd's Register, 19th Century British Library Newspapers, Queen Victoria: a biographical companion by Helen Rapport, The Gordon Heritage by Lt Col Derek Boyd, Gravesham Borough Council, The Independent, Historic Hansard, and Wikipedia